

# ISOLATING CHINA, AS PROPOSITION AND THE REALITY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

The latest round of talks, August 2, [between the Military Commanders of India and China](#), did not produce any breakthrough, and the situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Ladakh sector thus remains essentially unchanged. All that is evident is that China has indicated a willingness to resile from occupying territory beyond its 1960 Claim line. A return to the *status quo ante* prior to May this year, is nowhere in sight.

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Meanwhile, a war of words between India and China has broken out. India's External Affairs Minister has promulgated that "the state of the border and the future of our ties (with China) cannot be separated. That is the reality." China's riposte was to reiterate that their troops "were on its side of the traditional customary boundary line". This was followed, thereafter, by China wading into and criticising what is essentially India's internal matter, *viz.*, the changes effected to the status of Jammu and Kashmir in August last year.

In the meantime, relations between the United States and China continue to deteriorate. Talk of a new realignment of forces taking place, with the U.S. and China leading different camps, is very much in the air. After years of cooperating with one another, the U.S. and China are currently at the stage of confrontation, with both seeking allies to join their camps. The rhetoric has begun to resemble the Cold War era and both sides are even willing to display their military muscle. This places several countries, especially in Asia, in a difficult position as most of them are loathe to take sides — especially with a belligerent China as neighbour.

The contrast between the U.S. and China could hardly be greater. While the U.S. may not necessarily be the first choice for many countries of Asia and the Asia-Pacific region, in the case of China it is clearly more feared than loved. No one in Asia (Pakistan is perhaps an exception) nurses any doubts about China's 'imperialist ambitions', or about Chinese President Xi Jinping's authoritarian world view. Beijing's virtual takeover of Hong Kong, paying scant regard to the concept of 'one country two systems', has only confirmed what had long been known about China's intentions under Mr. Xi. Well before this, the region had been a witness to China's rampant land grab in the South China Sea. In the 1970s, China grabbed control over the Paracel Islands from Vietnam. In the 1990s, it occupied Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands, an area of the South China Sea that the Philippines had always considered its territory. In the 21st Century, China has continued with the same tactics of taking control over territories belonging to smaller neighbours; one which attracted international attention was the Scarborough Shoal confrontation in 2012, when Chinese Marine Surveillance Ships came into direct confrontation with the Philippine Navy.

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In March-April this year, while the rest of the world was wrestling with the COVID-19 pandemic, China further stepped up its aggressive actions, renaming almost 80 geographical features in the region as an index of Chinese sovereignty. Complaints galore also exist about China's expansionist attitudes beyond the South China Sea; Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia and South Korea have all complained about China's menacing postures in their vicinity. China's favourite approach, it would seem, has been unilateralism rather than compromise, when

dealing with its smaller neighbours. Implicitly also, it reflects the unwritten code of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Maritime Silk Road.

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Notwithstanding all this, China is far from being quarantined. Hardly any country in Asia is willing to openly confront China, and side with the U.S. Many countries, especially those in East Asia, are unwilling to be seen taking sides at this juncture, their explanation for this being that China was always known to be over-protective of the South China Sea, considering it a natural shield against possible hostile intervention by outside forces inimical to it. Neither the presence of U.S. aircraft carriers in the South China Sea, the presence of China's missile sites in recently reclaimed areas, or the wariness that most Association of Southeast Asian Nations display *vis-à-vis* China, has been enough to make countries in the region openly side with the U.S. and against China. Meanwhile, China is determined to press home its advantage, irrespective of international law or regional concerns.

What is specially disconcerting is that despite a series of diktats from Washington to restrict economic and other relations with China, the United Kingdom's decision to end reliance on Chinese imports and call off its Huawei 5G project, and growing anti-China sentiments heard across Europe — all of which make for good copy — China remains unfazed. China seems confident that its stranglehold on the global economy ensures that it does not face any real challenge. It would be wise for India to recognise this.

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It is equally necessary to realise how fickle some of these countries can be when it comes to economic issues. Australia is a prime example. The latter is a member of the Quad (the U.S., Japan, Australia and India), that is widely seen as an anti-China coalition. Nevertheless, at a recent meeting in Washington between U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, the U.S. Secretary of Defence Mark Esper, the Australian Foreign Minister and the Australian Defence Minister, Australia made it clear that China is important for Australia, that it would not do anything contrary to its interests, and a strong economic engagement was an essential link in the Australia-China relationship.

Likewise, the U.K.'s Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Dominic Raab, recently stated in its Parliament, that the U.K. wants a positive relationship with China, would work with China, and that there was enormous scope for positive constructive engagement.

It is thus more than evident that few nations across the world are willing to risk China's ire because of strong economic ties that have been forged over the years. Economic ties are proving way stronger than military and strategic ones. Even in Asia, while a majority of ASEAN countries have grave concerns about China's predatory tactics, with the ASEAN having become one of China's biggest trading partners, it adopts a default position. *viz.*, "not to take sides".

At this time, when the dice should actually have been loaded against China, it is India that is finding many of its traditional friends being less than helpful. While [India's relations with Pakistan](#) had nowhere to go but downhill, India's present stand-off with China has provided Pakistan with yet another opportunity to fish in troubled waters, including the production of a "fake map" of Pakistan, which includes parts of Indian territory such as Siachen, Jammu and Kashmir and Gujarat.

**Also read: [China has crossed its 1960 claims along the LAC](#)**

India's relations with Nepal, meanwhile, have hit a road block. Relations have soured in recent months, and Nepal has gone to the extent of publishing new maps which show the 'Kalapani area' as a part of Nepal. In Sri Lanka, the return of the Rajapaksas to power after the recent elections does not augur too well for India-Sri Lanka relations. It is, however, the strain in India-Bangladesh relations (notwithstanding the warm relationship that exists between Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Indian leaders), that is a real cause for concern, since it can provide a beachhead against Chinese activities in the region.

China is, meanwhile, busy 'stirring the pot' elsewhere in South Asia. In July, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi organised a virtual meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Nepal, Afghanistan and Pakistan,. Here, he proposed taking forward an economic corridor plan with Nepal, styled as the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network, and expanding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan, touting benefits of new economic corridors on the lines of the CPEC.

China has also made headway in Iran to an extent, again at India's expense. Iran and China are reported to be currently pursuing an economic and security partnership that would involve massive Chinese investments in energy and other sectors in Iran, in exchange for China receiving regular supplies of Iranian oil for the next 25 years. China has also dexterously positioned itself to circumvent India's monopoly over the Chabahar Port, by providing a munificent aid package for the Chabahar-Afghanistan Rail link, thereby undercutting India's offer of aid and assistance for the rail project.

Geo-balancing is not happening to China's disadvantage. This lesson must be well understood, when countries like India plan their future strategy.

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